



AGYA Conference at the Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen  
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## Tangible and Intangible Heritage of Oriental Christianity: Preserving the Culture of Maaloula

For more than five years now, Syria has been suffering from an atrocious civil war. Almost five million Syrians have fled their homeland, escaping a merciless conflict that not only brought death to countless civilians but also destroyed large parts of a nation that used to be one of the most vibrant cultural centres of the Arab world. Although hardly anything points to a foreseeable end of this miserable situation, various scholars already reflect on how to reconstruct Syria's enormously rich cultural heritage after the war.

The Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) brings together excellent Arab and German scholars to face shared challenges and develop solutions through research cooperation. One of the topics AGYA members are constantly working on is cultural heritage. In order to review the damage of ancient Syrian sites and discuss the measures that need to be taken for their recovery, AGYA members Ammar Abdulrahman and Jens Scheiner gathered experts from Syria, Germany, France and Denmark at the University of Tübingen. As the civil war also impairs the peculiar ethnic, religious, and linguistic variety of the country, the participants of this meeting put special emphasis on the challenge of preserving Syria's immaterial cultural heritage as well.

Maaloula, a village located about 60 kilometres north of Damascus, served as the conference's starting and focal point. Known as one of the oldest settlements of Oriental Christianity, Maaloula was the scene of massive destructions while under siege of Islamist extremists in 2013. Due to the systematic demolition of churches, monasteries, shrines, and icons, Maaloula's residents were largely forced to flee their home village to Damascus, the Lebanon, or other countries. Since Maaloula is one of the last remaining places where Western Neo-Aramaic – an Aramaic dialect often designated as "the language of Jesus" – is spoken, the village's substantial loss of population marks a massive threat to its religious and linguistic cultural heritage. What needs to be done in order to revive a village that has been praised as one of the earliest and most original localities of Christianity for hundreds of years? And to what extent may the unfortunate fate of Maaloula be interpreted as a symbol for the decline of a nation whose identity was largely built on the peaceful coexistence of numerous ethnic and religious groups? Questions like these marked the leitmotif of a conference that provided German and Syrian (mostly expat) scholars a rather rare opportunity for mutual academic exchange.

### [Reviewing the Damage and Loss of Cultural and Immaterial Heritage of Maaloula](#)

Mahmoud Hamoud, Director of Antiquities in the Damascus Area, presented a detailed account of the damage and loss of Maaloula's cultural heritage in his opening lecture to the conference. After showing various photographic documentations of Maaloula's destruction, Hamoud also reported on the extensive looting of icons that were illegally put up for sale on the international antiquity market. Despite Maaloula's desolate condition, Hamoud expressed his confidence that the historic sites of the village may be reconstructed rather quickly. In order to do so, however, the local authorities are in need of additional financial support from the international community, Hamoud added.

## The Current State of Syrian Cultural Heritage and the Future Challenges of its Protection

In his talk “The Current State of Syrian Cultural Heritage and the Future Challenges of its Protection”, Nibal Muhesen (Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen) outlined the extent to which the destruction of ancient sites is accompanied by a relentless return of iconoclasm. As Muhesen pointed out, the demolition of Assyrian monuments or Christian icons is not only led by the iconoclastic beliefs of Islamist extremists – it also is a deliberate attack on Syria’s multi-ethnic and multi-religious history. According to Muhesen, the preservation of the country’s cultural heritage therefore requires the restoration of a national identity that mirrors the linguistic, ethnic, and religious plurality of pre-war Syria.

## Capacity Building for Cultural Heritage in Syria: The “Stunde Null” Project

Ralph Bodenstein from the German Archaeological Institute (GAI) talked about the project “Stunde Null”, an initiative that seeks to provide technical and academic support for a rapid reconstruction of war-ravaged countries such as Syria or Iraq. Set up by the GAI in cooperation with the Archaeological Heritage Network, the Directorate-General for Culture and Communication at the Federal Office, and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, the “Stunde Null” initiative has launched several capacity building projects that are meant to equip Syrian archaeologists, architects, city planners, or conservators with cutting-edge academic knowledge and traditional artisanal skills. By means of these measures, Bodenstein explained, the “Stunde Null” project hopes to enable local experts to rebuild their home country as independently as possible.

## The Use of New Technologies in the Rehabilitation of Syrian Heritage During the War

Houmam Saad from the Laboratoire d’Archéologie et Philologie of the École Normale Supérieure gave a vivid impression of the potential of digital imaging technologies for the reconstruction of damaged archaeological sites. Being one of the first archaeologists who entered the ruins of Palmyra after its liberation from ISIS fighters in 2016, Saad displayed numerous 3D models of the ancient city that were created by means of digital drone cameras. According to Saad, the use of drones not only enables archaeologists to document highly mined areas under fairly safe circumstances – it also allows for a considerable acceleration of the usually rather time-consuming archaeological documentation process itself. Since digital imaging technologies also simplify the reconstructive correlation of fragmented archaeological objects, Saad proposed to make use of this particular technological device in heavily destroyed places such as Maaloula as well.





## Tangible and Intangible Heritage of Resafa (Sergiopolis)

Axel Schumann provided some insights into an excavation project that was conducted by the Department of Architectural History of the Technische Universität Berlin in the ancient city of Resafa in pre-war Syria. Like Maaloula, Schumann explained, Resafa (which was known as Sergiopolis in Roman times) mainly functioned as a Christian pilgrimage town ever since the 4th century. As Schumann highlighted, various archaeological findings point towards a long-term peaceful coexistence between long-established Christians and Muslim residents. Schumann thus argued to regard Resafa as a decidedly universal element of Syria's cultural heritage which, despite its dominant Christian history, does by no means belong to one particular religious group only.

## The Old City of Aleppo – A Comparative Perspective

Youssef Kanjou, former Director of Antiquities in the Aleppo region and now affiliated with the Institute of Archaeology at the University of Tübingen, outlined some of the most pressing problems archaeologists are facing in their attempt to protect and rebuild the old city of Aleppo. Widely destroyed in the course of the civil war, Aleppo's historic centre, which became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1986, lost its particular "taste of the ancient" almost entirely. Kanjou admitted that parts of the old city may well be reconstructed authentically relatively quickly. Just like Mahmoud Hamoud, however, he also made clear that such an endeavour may only be realised with appropriate financial aid from the international community. Kanjou further conceded that the ambition to rebuild the old city of Aleppo is complicated by two mutually contradicting factors: While a considerable number of former inhabitants is eager to move back into their houses as quickly as possible, local authorities are forced to slow down such requests in order to meet official architectural regulations. This circumstance, Kanjou explained, exemplifies one of the biggest challenges any reconstruction effort is confronted with in Syria.

## Excavation in Baz Jaabadeen in Maaloula

Andrew Kandel (Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften) informed the conference participants about the prehistoric past of Maaloula. Usually valued for its Early Christian history, archaeological as well as geological surveys have shown that the Maaloula region had been a favoured settling spot across various prehistoric periods. Most sites, Kandel said with reference to the results the "Tübingen-Damaskus Excavation and Survey Project" (1999-2010), date back to the Middle Palaeolithic and give evidence of manifold Neanderthal activities. Kandel, who used to live in Maaloula during his extended field work stays, mentioned that some prehistoric caves still remain unexplored, which is why he expressed his hope to be able to continue his research in the region as soon as possible.



## Preservation of Immaterial Heritage in Maaloula

Gabagh Qablo, a former member of the Department of History at the University of Damascus, and Werner Arnold, who serves as professor of Semitic languages at the University of Heidelberg, shed considerable light on the linguistic specificity of the Maaloula region, thus touching upon a topic that is strongly related to a defining feature of Syria's immaterial cultural heritage. Whereas Qablo demonstrated a wide-ranging structural similarity between ancient Aramaic and Arabic, Arnold combined his linguistic analysis of the Neo Western-Aramaic dialect with specific political requests in regard to Syria's cultural and educational policy. According to Arnold, deliberate investments in early-childhood education programs provide the most effective tool for a sustainable preservation of Maaloula's linguistic cultural heritage. Arnold hence proposed to train bilingual kindergarten and school teachers and to provide sufficient age-appropriate graphic, musical, literary, and poetic material that actually encourages the people of Maaloula to revive their linguistic heritage in a rather playful manner. The most important procedure that needs to be undertaken in order to preserve Maaloula's peculiar dialect, however, consisted in the rapid reconstruction of the village. If the people of Maaloula are not able to return into their houses as soon as possible, Arnold warned, the linguistic tradition of Neo Western-Aramaic might come to an irreversible end.

## Impressions of the Daily Life in Maaloula

In a public evening event, Elias Nasrullah concluded the conference with an account of the daily life in the village of Maaloula. Born in Maaloula in 1939 and author of various books on the village's history and culture, Nasrullah conveyed a colourful impression of Maaloula's famous Christian festivities, such as Saint Cross or Mark Takla. Showing various photographs and videos of recent religious festivals, Nasrullah vividly expressed the village's quest to defend and retain its tradition-steeped religious and cultural identity. The evening was complemented by a cooking demonstration of Syrian celebrity chef Fadi Alauwad who gave a sample of his culinary skills.

## About the Workshop Organizers

Ammar Abdulrahman is archeologist and was former lecturer at the University of Damascus. As a fellow of the Philipp-Schwartz-Initiative of the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung/Foundation he currently works as research associate at the University of Tübingen. His research activities include projects on restoration and preservation of cultural heritage in Syria and other Arab countries. Abdulrahman is an AGYA member since 2014.

Jens Scheiner is Professor for Islamic Studies at the Georg-August University of Göttingen. Jens Scheiner conducts research on the political, social and cultural history from late antiquity to classical Islamic times, Islamic religion and hadith history. He is AGYA member since 2013.

## Images

- 1: Group picture of the participants of the conference
- 2: Maaloula, a village located about 60 kilometres north of Damascus, served as the conference's starting and focal point of the conference.
- 3: FLTR: Jens Scheiner (AGYA member and Professor for Islamic Studies, Georg-August University of Göttingen), Ammar Abdulrahman (AGYA Member and Professor at the Institute for Ancient Near Eastern Studies (IANES), University of Tübingen), Mahmoud Hamoud (Director of the Antiquities in the Damascus Area) and Werner Arnold (Professor for Languages and Cultures of the Near East Semitic Studies, University of Heidelberg)
- 4: Dr. Nibal Muhesen (Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, ToRS, Københavns Universitet)
- 5: FLTR: Youssef Kanjou (Former Director of Aleppo Antiquities, University of Tübingen), Ammar Abdulrahman (AGYA Member and Professor at the Institute for Ancient Near Eastern Studies (IANES), University of Tübingen), Andrew Kandel (Department of Early Prehistory & Quaternary Ecology, University of Tübingen)
- 6: Ralph Bodenstein (German Archaeological Institute) and Dr. Ulrike Albrecht (Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung/Foundation)

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